

“YOU LEFT US YOURSELF AS FOOD”
Insights on the Eucharist from Saint Catherine of Siena

by

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Italy in the fourteenth century was a place of chaos and confusion for society and for the church. Socially, it was a time of feuds among the city-states themselves, and between those states and church authorities; class conflict was almost a norm; poverty was widespread and the plague was claiming many lives. Ecclesiastically, the papacy was exiled from Rome, situated in Avignon, France; the Crusades were underway, fueled by religious passion and cultural intolerance; and the church was as much involved in forging solutions for society as it was in facilitating the salvation of souls. It was a time with no clear sense of direction for the future.

Into this tumultuous context is born Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa, more popularly known as Saint Catherine of Siena. Characterizing this Doctor of the Church is no easy task. She is recognized as a mystic by the integrity of her life as a Third Order Dominican and by the depth of wisdom evident in her major writing, *The Dialogue*, in her prayers and her extensive correspondence. Catherine is also apostolic, even activist. She was involved in the most urgent social and ecclesial issues of her day: feuds between states, service to the poor and to victims of the plague, fidelity of the clergy, the Crusades, papal authority, institutional reform. Whether addressing prince or prelate, she was never afraid to speak her mind, proclaiming the truth of God's Word as it had been revealed to her.

Saint Catherine demonstrates a healthy balance between action and contemplation. She is never too busy to pray. No social prowess or theological precision sustained her in the midst of the many responsibilities and activities which filled her life. Even if she had had the benefits of formal education she would have claimed neither prowess nor precision. She recognized that only a vibrant and vital relationship with the Lord prompted her and provided the stamina and sensitivity she needed to accomplish all that her country and the church challenged her to do. That relationship with the Lord included concerns and hopes for the society and church in which

she lived, as well as the cares and aspirations of those she encountered. Her participation in the sacramental life of the church was foundational to her relationship with the Lord.

These present reflections will focus on the insights which Saint Catherine of Siena passes on to us concerning the great gift of the Eucharist, “the treasure, the holy sacrament” (*The Dialogue*, chap. 133), which sustained her throughout life.

“I gave you this food”

In referring to the Eucharist as food, Saint Catherine echoes a fundamental teaching presented by Jesus himself. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink” (John 6:54-55). As food, the Eucharist is basic nourishment for the Christian life; Catherine builds upon this teaching to highlight the essential qualities of this food. Her writing reflects God speaking to her.

My deep charity gave him to you as food for your salvation and for your nourishment in this life where you are pilgrim travelers, so that you would have refreshment and would not forget the blessing of the blood. I in my divine providence gave you this food, my gentle Truth, to help you in your need. (*ibid.*, chap. 112)

As usual, Catherine is straightforward and practical. This food is for salvation and for nourishment, and both are necessary. We are travelers, we are on a journey. The extent of the journey and the distractions that we will inevitably encounter along the way can tire us and distort our reasons for making the journey. This food refreshes us as we continue on our way, reminding us of all that Jesus has done for us through the Paschal Mystery. This refreshment and reminder are evidence of God’s providence to us; they are the Truth of God’s care for us.

Truth – this is a major theme in Saint Catherine’s spirituality; it is among her favorite names for God and Christ. It expresses her experience of God in whom there can be found no trace of deceit or duplicity. The Eucharist as God’s “gentle Truth” guides us securely on our journey and provides the sustenance we need. We encounter and are nourished by this Truth each time we participate in the Eucharist. This gentle Truth is a significant means through which God’s transforming work unfolds within us. The Truth must be the object of our desire.

Saint Catherine’s prayer reflects this same perspective; the Eucharist expresses God’s continuing presence among us and strengthens us for the journey.

O boundless charity! Just as you gave us yourself, wholly God and wholly human, so you left us all of yourself as food so that while we are pilgrims in this life we might not collapse in our weariness but be strengthened by you, heavenly food. O mercenary people! And what has your God left you? He has left you himself, wholly God and wholly human, hidden under the whiteness of this bread. O fire of love! Was it not enough to gift us with creation in your image and likeness, and to create us anew in grace in your Son’s blood, without giving us yourself as food, the whole of divine being, the whole of God? What drove you? Nothing but your charity, mad with love as you are! (*Prayers*, 10:24-45)

God’s love for us is extravagant. In the Eucharist we are touched by a “boundless charity” and the “fire of love.” This love has gifted us first by our creation in God’s image and likeness; then by creating us anew through the life and death of Jesus; and now by giving us food which sustains us. Creation, Incarnation, Salvation, Eucharist – such is the expansive nature of God’s constant and continuing love for us. This can only be the work of one who is “mad with love.”

In societies where food is accessible and plentiful, it can be taken for granted. The same reality can color our relationship with the Eucharist. We can take for granted or even forget the great love through which we have received this sublime gift. Saint Catherine recognizes the need to focus on and to explore the immensity of God's graciousness to us and love for us.

You want me to contemplate your gift to me – your gift of creation in your image and likeness. In that creation, supreme eternal purity, you joined yourself with the mire of our humanity. You were driven by the fire of your charity, and with that same fire you left us yourself as food. (*ibid.*, 12:71-82)

We, too, must contemplate this gift. We, too, must recognize the fire of love which created us, became like us, and continues to sustain us through the Eucharist. We, too, must eat this food and be transformed in God.

“The soul is in God”

Jesus indicates the close connection between the Eucharist as food and as a means of union with him. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them” (John 5:56). The Eucharist is a powerful support and a pure source of nourishment for our life. It is yet more. Through the Eucharist we cultivate a lasting intimacy with God. From Saint Catherine's perspective, the Eucharist draws us into an intense union with God.

“In communion the soul seems more sweetly bound to God and better knows his truth. For then the soul is in God and God in the soul, just as the fish is in the sea and the sea is in the fish” (*The Dialogue*, chap. 2). This brief text articulates eloquently an important principle for understanding the primary effects of the Eucharist on which Catherine comments later in her writing. The principle is basic. By baptism and through our participation in the Christian community and by our efforts to live the mission and message of Jesus, the soul is already united

to God and knows God's truth. This union and knowledge reflect the Christian character of our life. It is our responsibility, in cooperation with God's grace, to advance that union and knowledge.

There is an intensity in the Eucharist which strengthens that character, deepening our intimacy with God and sharpening our understanding of God's ways. Our participation in the Eucharist nurtures inseparability from God and familiarity with God. In commenting on the effects of the Eucharist which flow from all this, Saint Catherine builds upon the basic principle.

Contemplate the marvelous state of the soul who receives this bread of life, this food of angels... When she receives this sacrament she lives in me and I in her. ... Grace lives in such a soul because, having received this bread of life in grace, she lives in grace. When this appearance of bread has been consumed, I leave behind the imprint of my grace, just as a seal that is pressed into warm wax leaves its imprint when it is lifted off. Thus does the power of the sacrament remain there in the soul; that is, the warmth of my divine charity, the mercy of the Holy Spirit, remains there. The light of my only-begotten Son's wisdom remains there, enlightening the mind's eye. The soul is left strong, sharing in my strength and power, which make her strong and powerful against her selfish sensuality and against the devil and the world. (*ibid.*, chap. 112).

According to Saint Catherine, the work of the Eucharist within us is extensive. First, she reiterates the union between God and the soul which takes place during communion; "she lives in me and I in her." As she has noted earlier, these encounters with the Lord form the foundation upon which a lasting union and intimacy are built. Second, the soul "lives in grace." Participation in the Eucharist calls us to holiness, to live by God's grace in all we do. Third, we

are imprinted by that grace which conveys power to us. Specifically, that power is “the warmth of divine charity, the mercy of the Holy Spirit, ... the light of my only begotten Son’s wisdom.” This love and mercy and wisdom must become the hallmarks of our life if we are to be known as followers of Jesus and as people of the Eucharist. Fourth, “the soul is left strong” with the Lord’s own strength, enabling us to remain faithful in response to whatever could compromise our relationship with God. Fidelity reflects our desire for and our commitment to that relationship.

These effects of the Eucharist, these qualities which remain, will develop only if they are lived, only if they are brought into our ordinary tasks and responsibilities, only if they mark our encounters and relationships with others. Union, holiness, love, mercy, wisdom, fidelity – these are the qualities by which we will be gradually transformed into the likeness of Jesus; these qualities confirm that “the soul is in God and God in the soul” not only when we participate in the Eucharist, but throughout our life.

“With affectionate love”

“You must receive this sacrament not only with your bodily senses but with your spiritual sensitivity, by disposing your soul to see and receive and taste this sacrament with affectionate love” (*The Dialogue*, chap. 111). Our participation in the Eucharist engages every aspect of our humanity. Most certainly the physical dimension of our life, the “bodily senses,” are involved because of the materials consumed. Quite literally, the body and blood of Christ become part of the very fiber of our physical constitution. Saint Catherine reminds us, though, that our “spiritual sensitivity” is the key means through which we receive the full benefits of this sacrament. We must be disposed to receive the Eucharist; we must prepare ourselves. That disposition and preparation must be characterized and driven by love, by a true affection for the Lord. Apart

from that love, the Eucharist can become for us merely a ritual meal with little real significance for and influence on our spiritual growth and development. How can we dispose ourselves, then, “to see and receive and taste this sacrament with affectionate love?”

“What tastes and sees and touches this sacrament? The soul’s sensitivity. How does she see it? With her mind’s eye, so long as it has the pupil of holy faith” (*ibid.*). We see the Eucharist by faith; thus, we accept and acknowledge the body and blood of the Lord present in this sacrament. Apart from that faith we see but bread and wine. From Saint Catherine’s perspective, the eyes of faith are sharper and more discerning than our physical sense of sight. She teaches us that “the spiritual must be the principal vision, because it cannot be deceived. It is with this eye, then, that you must contemplate this sacrament” (*ibid.*). Physical sight can be deceived. We can choose to see what we want, easily misleading our senses and ourselves. Faith is not so easily duped. We may not accept or be comfortable with the truth which our spiritual sight places before us, but we do not thereby reconfigure that truth according to our preferences. As we become people of the Eucharist faith must become our primary mode of sight and interpretation. Saint Paul teaches us, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Such faith will guide us more surely than any other vision.

“How is this sacrament touched? With the hand of love. This hand it is that touches what the eye has seen and known in this sacrament. The hand of love touches through faith, confirming as it were what the soul sees and knows spiritually through faith” (*ibid.*). Love builds upon faith, enabling us to encounter Jesus in the Eucharist. We touch in love what we see by faith. If we do not see with the eyes of faith, then we touch but bread and wine. Saint Catherine recognizes the intimacy into which we are invited through our participation in this sacrament. Her teaching here echoes the opening words of the Saint John’s first letter: “We declare to you

what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1:1). We touch with love what we see by faith. The Eucharist gives us an unparalleled opportunity for closeness to Jesus. We encounter Jesus with love and so are built up in love and gradually become people of love.

“How is this sacrament tasted? With holy desire. The body tastes only the flavor of bread, but the soul tastes me, God and human” (*ibid.*). We taste through longing what we touch in love and see by faith. Our relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist must be more than obligation, we must desire to see and touch and taste the Lord. We must long to be one with Jesus, we must want the Lord to be a part of our life. It only through our desire for this union that we can taste the depth of God’s love for us in the Eucharist. There is power in human desire and that power is a gift of our creation. God does not use force in drawing us into union. God invites us, we must want and choose to respond; we must desire to live the fullness of God’s gift to us. Apart from that desire, our life can lack focus and direction; we will miss the opportunities for union that God offers to us. To be alert for those opportunities, everything in the spiritual life must be done “with holy desire.”

Saint Catherine summarizes her teaching by indicating the inherent collaboration among the faith, love, and desire with which we must approach the Eucharist.

The body’s senses can be deceived, but not the soul’s. In fact, they confirm and clarify the matter for her, for what the mind’s eye has seen and known through the pupil of holy faith, she touches with the hand of love. What she has seen she touches in love and faith. And she tastes it with her spiritual sense of holy desire,

that is, she tastes the burning, unspeakable charity with which I have made her worthy to receive the tremendous mystery of this sacrament and its grace. (*ibid.*)

Thus do we develop and mature in our capacity to approach and receive the Eucharist “with affectionate love.”

“According to the desire of those who receive it”

The Eucharist is a gift to us, yet its affect on us can be neither assumed nor taken for granted. If such were the case, we could receive the sacrament as disinterested bystanders and our growth in the spiritual life would be automatically assured. The reality, however, is that the quality and character of our desire for and response to this gift of the Eucharist have a key role in determining the extent of its effects on our spiritual development. Saint Catherine’s teaching is direct.

This food gives more or less strength according to the desire of those who receive it, whether they receive it sacramentally or virtually. ‘Sacramentally’ is when one communicates in the holy Sacrament. ‘Virtually’ is communicating through holy desire, both in longing for communion and in esteem for the blood of Christ crucified. (*The Dialogue*, chap. 66)

Catherine does not create an arbitrary distinction of intensity between the modes by which we can receive the Eucharist as if one would have a greater impact upon us regardless of our approach to it. Whether our reception of the Eucharist is ‘sacramental’ or ‘virtual,’ our desire for this encounter with the Lord remains the key component in strengthening and deepening our relationship with Jesus. This teaching challenges us to examine regularly the

quality of our preparation for and participation in the Eucharist. Our disposition does makes a difference.

Saint Catherine teaches us that the benefits available to us in the Eucharist are not limited by our capability and capacity to receive them. That capability and capacity are gifts to human nature by our creation in God's image and likeness. Any benefits from the Eucharist can be limited, however, by the quality of our desire to choose and embrace them.

It is with love that you come to receive my gracious glorious light, the light I have given you as food, to be administered to you by my ministers. But even though all of you receive the light, each of you receives it in proportion to the love and burning desire you bring with you. ... Each of you carries the light whole and undivided, for it cannot be divided by any imperfection in you who receive it or in those who administer it. You share as much of the light (that is, the grace you receive in this sacrament) as your holy desire disposes you to receive. (*ibid.*)

The light to which Catherine refers is nothing less than the fire of God's love and truth. We are transformed by that fire "more or less intensely depending on the material (we bring) to this flame" (*ibid.*). We will never be ignited by God's love if the material we bring to the fire of that love is not marked by a passion and desire for the transformation to which it invites us. The choice is ours; our disposition will determine what we receive.

"Each of you can grow in love and virtue as you choose and as I give you grace" (*ibid.*). Our continuing spiritual development, our growth in love and virtue, progresses through the interaction of our free will and God's grace. Both are necessary: free will, because God works by cooperation not coercion; grace, so we will advance with direction and by discernment. The Eucharist facilitates the workings of that grace and fashions our will according to God's own.

Our participation in the Eucharist is a privilege in which we share by our baptism and our initiation into the Body of Christ. It is also a responsibility we bear, an action which must engage us fully. We must embrace this privilege and accept this responsibility if the Eucharist is to be a means of growth for us. Truly, this sacrament accomplishes the work of transformation “according to the desire of those who receive it.”

“You are table and food and waiter”

We encounter the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist, and so we encounter the Trinity. We are thus drawn into the life of the Trinity and share in the gifts promised to us in baptism and by our incorporation into the Body of Christ. We have been invited to the banquet of the Eucharist, we are the guests. The role that Saint Catherine identifies for the Trinity at this banquet is service. In her *Prayers*, she says:

I shall clothe myself in your eternal will, and by this light I shall come to know that you, eternal Trinity, are table and food and waiter for us. You, eternal Father, are the table that offers us as food the Lamb, your only-begotten Son. He is the most exquisite of foods for us, both in his teaching which nourishes us in your will, and in the sacrament that we receive in holy communion, which feeds and strengthens us while we are pilgrim travelers in this life. And the Holy Spirit is indeed a waiter for us, for he serves us this teaching by enlightening our mind’s eye with it and inspiring us to follow it. (12:126-147)

In responding to such extravagance, we must come near the table, consume the food, and commend the waiter. We must enter into this relationship with the Trinity and accept the generous service extended to us, for its end is our transformation.

Saint Catherine's perspective on the Eucharist, like her spirituality, is eminently practical. It calls us to action, to take responsibility, to apply our faith in all the events of daily life. The Eucharist invites us into a lively intimacy with God, sustained and strengthened by the faith, love, and desire with which we approach this sacrament. The quality of our disposition and the character of our participation serve as gauges for the extent to which this sacrament will touch and transform our life. The Eucharist is our nourishment for the spiritual life, for following the Lord Jesus with integrity and intimacy, with purpose and passion. Lord, may we be ever grateful for that nourishment and recognize the great gift you have given to us when, in your love for us, "you left us yourself as food." May our life be flavored with that food, always welcoming the work of your transforming grace within us, and longing to live with you forever. Amen.